PROMOTING A CULTURE FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

AN INTERNATIONAL ENCOUNTER FOR EUROPEAN JOURNALISTS ON THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE LONDON, 9-11 JUNE 1993

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI), in cooperation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom (FCO) and with the support of the London newspaper *The Guardian*, sponsored an International Encounter for European Journalists on the Question of Palestine, in London, United Kingdom, from 9 to 11 June 1993. The Encounter was moderated by the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, Vladimir Petrovsky, and coordinated by Mustapha Tlili, Chief of the Anti- Apartheid, Decolonization and Palestine Programmes Section of DPI. It was opened by Douglas Hogg, Minister of State of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom.

The Encounter was part of DPI's special information programme on the question of Palestine, mandated by General Assembly resolution 47/64 C of 11 December 1992. The programme includes national, regional and international journalists' encounters and stems from the Assembly's conviction that the world-wide dissemination of accurate and comprehensive information on the question of Palestine remains of vital importance in heightening awareness of and support for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.

Each encounter brings prominent media representatives from a specific country or region together with Israeli, Palestinian and other Middle East experts to engage in free, fair and frank discussions, in order to further the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and to contribute to a peaceful solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The structure of the encounters is informal, with each panellist giving brief opening remarks, followed by a dialogue with the media representatives.

The London meeting was the third in a series of international encounters, the first two of which were organized in Helsinki in June 1991 (DPI publication, *Prospects for Peace in the Middle East: An Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue*, Sales No. E.92.I.25) and in Lisbon in September 1992 (DPI publication, *Building for Peace in the Middle East: A European Perspective*, Sales No. E.93.I.15).

The objective in London, as expressed by Mr. Petrovsky, was to discuss how to promote a culture for peace in the Middle East which would "nurture a comprehensive, society-wide system of values, beliefs and attitudes, the interplay and impact of which . . . would lead citizens of the Middle East . . . to put a premium on peace. The theme of this Encounter and its underlying objectives are an attempt to try to begin to encourage new kinds of reactions, new kinds of 'instincts', on the ground."

PARTICIPANTS

Panellists

There were 12 panellists: Graeme Bannerman, former Staff Director of the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee; Sir James Craig, Senior Associate Member, St. Anthony's College, Oxford, and President of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies; Avigdor Feldman, Member of the Board of Directors of Betselem, a human rights advocacy group in Israel; Major-General Shlomo Gazit, former Director of Israeli Military Intelligence and Senior Fellow at the Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies; Khalil Hindi, Palestinian representative at the Multilateral Negotiations on Economic Development and Professor of Economics at Manchester University, United Kingdom; Asa Kasher, Professor of Philosophy, Tel Aviv University; Yossi Olmert, former Director of the Israeli Government Press Office; Afif Safieh, Head of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Delegation in the United Kingdom; Hanna

Seniora, Publisher of *Al-Fajr*, Jerusalem; Nabeel Shaath, Adviser to the President of the PLO; Mohammed Sid-Ahmed, senior columnist of *Al-Ahram*, Cairo; and Ephraim Sneh, Member of the Israeli Knesset.

Media

The Encounter brought together a total of 35 media participants, including columnists, senior editors and editorial writers representing the following news organizations: *Zeri I Populit*, Albania; *Knack* and *Le Soir*, Belgium; Bulgarian Press Agency, Bulgaria; *Politiken*, Denmark; *Al-Ahram*, Egypt; *Ilta-Sanomat*, Finland; *Jeune Afrique*, *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*, France; *Die Zeit* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, Germany; *Kathimerini*, Greece; *The Irish Times*, Ireland; *Davar Weekly*, *Haaretz*, *Jerusalem Post*, *Maariv* and *Yediot Aharanot*, Israel; *Il Giornale* and *La Repubblica*, Italy; *Al Bayader Assyasi*, *Al-Fajr* and *Al Quds*, Jerusalem; *Trouw*, The Netherlands; *Aftenposten*, Norway; *Valor*, Portugal; Rompres, Romania; *Vek* and "Ostankino" TV Company, Russian Federation; *Svenska Dagbladet*, Sweden; *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *Tribune de Genève*, Switzerland; and ANKA News Agency, Turkey.

Also attending the Encounter were representatives of the London-based media, members of the diplomatic corps and expert observers.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

The Encounter provided a platform for a lively and informative exchange of views between Arabs and Israelis and the other expert panellists, affording valuable insights for participants. The fear, anxiety and mistrust on the part of both Palestinians and Israelis was plainly expressed, but there were many solid suggestions on how to overcome these emotions. Taken with the current high level of violence in the occupied territories, journalists and other observers at the Encounter found it quite understandable that the peace process should be so slow.

During the three-day meeting, there were widely differing assessments by Palestinian and Israeli speakers about what was really being offered by Israel in the peace negotiations which were then about to enter their tenth round in Washington. The Palestinians felt that the interim phase of autonomy must proceed to full sovereignty, whereas the Israelis were not prepared to accept a Palestinian State on their borders unless and until the interim phase had passed peacefully.

There were also numerous interventions from the floor suggesting that if the talks failed, the Palestinians and perhaps some Arab States could fall under the influence of "Islamic fundamentalists". Some asked if that wasn't a good reason for the Israelis to settle quickly, offering generous terms to the Palestinians. Some of the Israelis dismissed "fundamentalism" as a threat to the Arab side, not to themselves. An Arab editor pleaded with everyone to pay less attention to the extremists and to recognize that mainstream Islam represented a rich culture which could foster peace and reconciliation.

Other expert panellists appealed to both sides to promote a culture of peace by giving a positive spin to the negotiations and the issues at stake, while the Arab and Israeli speakers rested their case with the simple plea: "tell the truth." Overall, the panellists and the media representatives agreed that the Encounter had been a positive event.

SUMMARY OF SPEAKERS

Douglas Hogg, in his opening statement, called on both sides to moderate their tactics on the ground because the very existence of the peace process required continued popular support. "If that popular support falls away either within Israel or in the occupied territories, then the peace process will fail." The British Government, Mr. Hogg said, hoped that the tenth round of talks would at least flesh out the proposals for a detailed transfer of power during the interim period before full self-determination by the Pales-

tinians is achieved. Discussing the role of the media, Mr. Hogg called upon his audience of diplomatic journalists to be "as positive about the peace process as it's proper for you to be". The role of the media, he said, was to help create a climate of understanding on both sides which would make compromise possible.

Vladimir Petrovsky, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, endorsed that point by suggesting that all the participants in the Encounter had a "moral duty and perhaps the power to help create the adequate environment for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace". For too long, he said, a "culture of reciprocal rejection had prevailed in the Middle East". "Every man and woman of good will" in the Israeli and Palestinian societies "should cement a brick in the foundation of peace". Mr. Petrovsky also underlined the commitment of the United Nations to resolving the question of Palestine, which it had been grappling with for almost half a century. The failure of the Arabs and Israelis to carry out the General Assembly's partition plan of 1947 had "resulted in chronic bloodshed and tragedy for all the peoples of the region".

Mustapha Tlili, Chief of the Anti-Apartheid, Decolonization and Palestine Programmes, spoke on behalf of DPI. In his welcome to the participants, he said that "the temptation to seek, unilaterally, answers that satisfy narrow, shortsighted, national interests because of their immediate rewards, lasting or ephemeral, can make itself more compelling than the need for dialogue. It therefore requires wisdom, courage and a deep sense of belonging to the larger family of the international community for Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians to . . . engage in the kind of give and take that only women and men of reason and goodwill are capable of." Mr. Tlili went on to assure the participants that, as part of its special programme on the question of Palestine, "DPI will continue in its efforts to bring the two sides together in fora like this one in the hope that this will contribute to furthering the peace process and to reaching a solution to the Palestinian question."

Opening the panel discussion, **Nabeel Shaath**, Adviser to the President of the PLO, said "significant progress" had been made in the peace negotiations "but nothing can be put in the bank yet". He suggested that the next round might see the signing of a "Declaration of Principles" plus some agreement on the timing of elections for the proposed Palestinian Interim Self-Governing Authority. While the negotiators were very close on some issues, the future of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories and the status of Jerusalem, which was not formally on the negotiating agenda, remained complicated obstacles. Moreover, everything could be in jeopardy because of the "disastrous situation in Jerusalem, the wave of terror in Gaza, the economic siege, the deportations, the mass arrests and the shooting of children."

Ephraim Sneh, member of the Israeli Knesset, countered by arguing that the Palestinians had failed to seize their opportunities. He had expected that agreement on an interim self-government would have been achieved now that the Israeli Government had shown itself "ready for reconciliation". The Palestinians, he said, had been offered autonomy in "all spheres of civilian life", such as the economy, banking, agriculture, water, secondary legislation and even primary legislation with Israeli agreement. The Palestinians had so far rejected these proposals, but he advised them "never to reject a tangible offer". However, as the broad principles of separation, sharing of territory and economic integration had been accepted by both sides, he now thought they could "strike a deal" in the next six months.

Criticism of both sides was expressed by **Graeme Bannerman**, former Staff Director of the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The Israelis had made some significant concessions, but these had been "too little and too late" to have significant political impact. On the other hand, he questioned whether the Palestinian leadership could bring their constituency with them if agreement were to be reached. Mr. Bannerman commended the ingenious negotiating

system which had been devised. Syria was talking to Israel for the first time. Lebanon and Jordan were talking with Israel, and the Gulf States were involved in the multilateral groups which were examining economic questions. Overall, Mr. Bannerman felt that much had been accomplished in the peace process.

Sir James Craig, Senior Associate Member, St. Anthony's College, Oxford, and President of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, speaking to the theme of the Encounter, said that language was one of the cultural obstacles to the peace process, because Arabs were often seduced by their own language, and in speaking to their own people could inadvertently become bound by their rhetoric, while Israelis were afraid of being thought of as weak and overly compliant, and crafted their public language accordingly. Politicians and intellectuals, Sir James said, were more likely to see the benefits of compromise and the necessities of realism than was the man in the street, and meetings like this one could say to the negotiators: "be bold!" If negotiators were willing to make concessions and accept compromises, there was a body of opinion which would support them against the hardliners on both sides. He appealed to the media participants to put their whole heart into that endeavour and resist the temptation to construct a drama out of the meeting, because dramatic atmosphere was the enemy of compromise.

Afif Safieh, Head of the PLO Delegation in the United Kingdom, claimed that the Palestinians were often misunderstood, especially by the Israelis. "We are peace enthusiasts", he said, yet the Holocaust, he claimed, had blinded the Jews to their own wrongdoings. The oppression carried out in the occupied territories was all the more disturbing because it was carried out with the backing of a democratic electorate. Zionism was the most grievous thing to happen to the Palestinians in all their history. We are "diasporised", he said. "We deserve an historical apology from Israel." "In our Middle East today", he added, "we have either one people too many, or are short one State that needs to be created. And I believe history is still undecided between these two alternatives. I hope you opinion-makers help history make the right choice." He concluded by suggesting that perhaps an "elegantly imposed, mutually unacceptable" solution might be the best way to achieve peace.

Major-General Shlomo Gazit, former Director of Israeli Military Intelligence and Senior Fellow, Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies, said "We are not here to negotiate. We are here to try and better understand each other." He would like to have a real peace, such as the one between the United States and Canada, but he could not minimize psychological problems which created extremely important barriers that had to be addressed and resolved. Otherwise, there was no chance of dealing with the actual issues at stake. He went on to acknowledge that, some 40 years ago, he had been a member of the underground, and the British had probably called him a terrorist. "I can very well understand all Palestinians who are members of the underground", he said. "Your armed struggle is your only card that forces Israel to negotiate. But please say now, loud and clear, that, once we reach agreement, you shall deliver the goods and put an end to armed struggle against us. Please, convince me and my public that we are no longer rejected in the Middle East."

Khalil Hindi, Palestinian representative at the Multilateral Negotiations on Economic Development and Professor of Economics at Manchester University, United Kingdom, suggested that arguments about who was to blame were counterproductive. Whether Palestinians sought and achieved an apology from the Israelis was irrelevant to the cause of peace. Likewise, an Israeli quest for Arab acknowledgement and acceptance of Zionism was equally superfluous to the peace process. Both sides had to make the best of a bad situation. The Israelis, he said, had argued against having any institutions in the interim period which might develop into real national institutions. They had vetoed an environmental protection agency, a water authority and a national bank. He

contended that while the Palestinians wanted interim arrangements which would be "pregnant with possibilities", the Israelis wanted arrangements which would in many cases preclude further evolution. He summarized his view of the Encounter's theme by suggesting that a reversal of cause and effect was probably more true: to achieve a radical shift in the attitudes and perceptions of the antagonists, there had first to be peace in the area. So long as the antagonists were locked in an acutely nationalistic conflict, the perceptions of both sides would be moulded by the conflict. Discussing the role of the media, Professor Hindi said that it was not free or independent on either side, and he exhorted the audience to "tell people the truth".

Yossi Olmert, former Director of the Israeli Government Press Office, said that he was encouraged by the debate even if much of it was ferocious, simply because it was becoming routine. Two thirds of the Arab League was involved in the multilateral talks, which was all to the good. "We are moving in the right direction", he said, although the process was not quite irreversible. Mr. Olmert rejected the assertion, which had come up many times in the Encounter, that if the negotiations failed, then Israel's opponents could fall under the control of Islamic fundamentalism. "Islamic fundamentalism is not a pressure which requires Israel to settle", he said. As for the role of intellectuals and the media, he said "I don't think it is our role to tell them what to think and write. It's not our job. It is a cliché to say, 'You should report the truth', but nevertheless you have to repeat the clichés, so let's say it: 'Report the truth'."

Taking up that point, **Hanna Seniora**, Publisher of *Al-Fajr* in Jerusalem, said there was a media campaign to create a new enemy—Islam. The media should differentiate between radicalism and the real culture of Islam. The earlier the Palestinians could have their own State, the sooner they could turn the corner to cooperation with the Israelis. Then they could have both diplomatic and cultural ties with Israel. Mr. Seniora mentioned a few joint efforts between Arabs and Israelis to foster a new spirit, including the magazine *New Outlook*, which had folded, peace programmes in some schools and the Arab/Israeli Research Institute, which was half Arab and half Israeli.

Asa Kasher, Professor of Philosophy, Tel Aviv University, offered a psychological analysis of Israeli society. "We are a very nervous society", he said. The whole of Israel was an "intensive care unit". The Holocaust syndrome was a deeply rooted weakness, not, as some thought, wickedness. Deportation from their own lands and homes, which the Palestinians had suffered, was horrible, but it would be a mistake to compare it with the genocide of the Holocaust. The social duty of intellectuals, Professor Kasher said, was to render their society critical services and cultural leadership. Within the current context of promoting a culture for peace, he suggested three areas for exploration: symmetry, sympathy and symbology. His prescription for success was: "don't disregard the major differences between the parties to the conflict but, for the sake of a culture for peace, stress the similarities, emphasize analogies, underline symmetries. They abound."

The most novel proposal of the Encounter was made by **Mohamed Sid-Ahmed**, senior columnist of the Cairo daily *Al-Ahram*. Borrowing from the example of Japan, he suggested that Israel should invite all its critics and its "victims" in the region to a grand airing of grievances. Everyone should be invited, including the "radicals" such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Iranians, the Syrians and the Libyans. The conference would not be part of the current international negotiations, but rather a parallel activity within the region's community at large.

Responding to that proposal, **Mr. Olmert** said it was "an interesting but impractical idea". Israel, he claimed, had no similarity with Japan. **Professor Kasher** added that it would simply reinforce Israeli paranoia and therefore would not promote a culture for peace. **Mr. Sid-Ahmed** replied by saying that Israel might not have lost a war, but unlike Japan it certainly had not won the peace.

Avigdor Feldman, member of the Board of Directors of Betselem, regretted that the peace process had become very remote and Americanized. He said that what one could see on television every day was far removed from daily life and took place in distant cities, and asked whether it had to be that way. He said the peace process had been used by the Israeli Government as an excuse to raise the level of hardship in the territories, and by the Palestinians to increase the level of violence of the *intifada*. There was a deep cynicism in the Palestinian population, he said. The peace process needed to be brought into the region, brought back to the people; it was too important to be left to the politicians. That would be the most important confidence-building measure that could be carried out. In contrast to all the other speakers, Mr. Feldman asserted that complete separation of Jews and Arabs in the old land of Palestine was not the only option. "We have more mutual culture between Israelis and Palestinians than either of us with the Americans", he said.

General Gazit, in a further contribution, produced a list of proposals for practical action to reduce tension. He proposed cutting all the inflammatory material from school textbooks, revising Israeli maps to show the Green Line and redrawing Arab maps to show Israel. Professional groups such as lawyers, engineers and doctors should make contact across the ethnic divide and make sure their spouses joined in as well. Both sides should ask themselves where they were offending the other in cartoons, poems, newspapers and the like. In response to a question, General Gazit stressed that such confidence-building measures should be implemented prior to a settlement.

Summing up the three-day Encounter, **Sir James Craig** said that if a group of intellectuals could not achieve reconciliation, then the politicians certainly could not, and there would be "no hope that the populace could put aside their resentment and hostility". Some remarks uttered during the Encounter which reiterated the old culture of "reciprocal rejection" were deeply discouraging, but other contributions, such as proposals for confidence-building, were serious expressions of good will. Sir James said the problem was not so much an exchange of territory for peace as an exchange of "sovereignty for security". He said that was not a bad target to aim at. Despite his being an "old, blasé, cynical fellow", the Encounter had reminded him about how much progress had been made in relations between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

The Moderator, **Mr. Petrovsky**, closed the Encounter, saying, "This meeting has been much more than a media event. The discussions which we are about to conclude have proven to be closely connected to ongoing diplomatic processes related to the Middle East conflict. The Secretary-General of the United Nations has said that while the negotiations are taking place outside the United Nations, they still enjoy the support of all the parties concerned and are based on Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, long recognized as cornerstones of a comprehensive settlement. Both the Secretary-General and the General Assembly have strongly thrown their support behind the Madrid peace process, which is one of the most important attempts of the international community at solving the Middle East conflict." He added, "We can also say that we have in fact established, here in London, a kind of parallel track, something we could call 'constructive parallelism' with multidisciplinary components, including political, academic and media elements." He concluded by saying, "I believe we have seen a glimpse during our discussions of what could be achieved if there were the political will to take hard decisions in risky times, of what could be achieved if there were a courageous dynamism focused on creating peace."

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